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SUBJECT: TENS OF THOUSANDS ATTEND RELIGIOUS HOLIDAY EVENTS THROUGHOUT
SOUTHERN VIETNAM

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SUBJECT: Tens of Thousands Attend Religious Holiday Events

Summary

11. (SBU) 2007 Christmas celebrations held by Protestant and Catholic congregations throughout Southern Vietnam were an exuberant affirmation of Vietnam's progress on religious freedom in recent years. While some celebrations were a first, like the soccer stadium rally of fifteen Protestant house church groups that drew crowds of 8,000 to 13,000 people, others were a continuation of long-held Christmas traditions, like the thousands of Catholics who gathered for Midnight Mass at Notre Dame Cathedral on Christmas Eve. Protestant leaders reported the majority of their congregations in the South celebrated Christmas freely, including the Central Highlands. Even some dissident Catholic priests reported an incident-free Christmas this year. The few congregations who reported problems were located in areas where Christianity is a relatively new concept and/or where local officials still perceive the spread of Christianity as a possible threat to public order. In some cases, church leaders held firm and convinced local authorities to allow celebrations to take place. Many religious leaders credited their expanding dialogue with GVN over recent years as a factor in their eventual success. Unsurprisingly, problems with religious freedom tend to be more prevalent in places where poor leadership, corruption and poverty persist. End summary.

Thousands Join in Christmas Celebrations Across South

12. (SBU) For the first time, approximately 13,000 Protestant followers and their friends (representing around fifteen different denominations) gathered to attend four hour-long Evangelical Christmas celebrations at a soccer stadium behind the former Presidential Palace in the heart Ho Chi Minh City during the week before Christmas. The event featured group prayers, hymns and the conversion of over 1500 new followers. The event was organized by the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship (VEF), an umbrella group that represents over 50 Protestant house church denominations. Event organizers said local authorities authorized the event two days in advance and allowed the VEF to post fifteen large advertisements and hand out Evangelical pamphlets and flyers to attendees. Performers ranged from a 64-voice choir to a popular local television singer who became a Baptist a year ago sang songs praising Jesus onstage. Audience members sang along as they viewed the performance from two large TV screens. The VEF leadership said representatives from the HCMC Committee for Religious Affairs and the police also attended the event.

13. (SBU) A wide variety of other Protestant groups from across

Central and Southern Vietnam also said they held special Christmas services ranging from 50 to 2,000 participants. Leaders of the Methodist Church, Good News Mission, United Gospel Outreach Church, Vietnam Baptist Convention, United Baptist Church, Assembly of God and one of the two Inter-Evangelical Movement branches also told ConGen officers holding Christmas celebrations "was easier this year." Pastor Henry Nguyen Ngoc Hien from the Vietnam Baptist Convention (VBC) believes the National Committee for Religious Affairs explicitly instructed regional authorities to help facilitate Christmas celebrations for all Christian groups. Religious groups said they were only required to give prior notification of their plans and to adhere to fire safety standards. While not all of the congregations actually notified the authorities, those that did were given approval for their events quickly and efficiently. Those that didn't pre-notify reported they were still able to hold their events successfully.

14. (SBU) Pastor Pham Toan Ai from the United Baptist Church said his congregations organized 92 celebrations that went "very smoothly." Pastor Henry from VBC said all 100 of his congregations held "successful Christmas celebrations." Pastor Steven Doan Trung Tin from the Vietnam Good News Mission (VGNM) told us he had not heard of any problems for his 92 congregations during Christmas. VGNM Evangelist Mai Hong Sanh from Ea H'leo district of the Central Highlands province of Dak Lak also reported "great celebrations that lasted for 3 days." (Note: For the past two years, this congregation has reported pressure from local authorities trying to convince their followers to join the GVN-recognized SECV congregation. The US Committee on International Religious Freedom also visited this congregation and talked with Mai Hong Sanh in Oct 2007. End note.)

For Some Groups, Christmas Crowds Routine

15. (SBU) Churches with national-level registration like the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and United World

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Mission (UWM) reported a "very good round" of Christmas celebrations for their congregations. The SECV in HCMC held a two-day rally downtown for the third consecutive year, drawing crowds of up to 10,000 followers each night. SECV leaders across the Central Highlands provinces reported hundreds of celebrations with no negative incidents. In the Mekong Delta province of Tra Vinh, where one SECV church in a small commune has recently experienced hostilities from the majority Khmer community, Christmas celebrations were moved to another, less volatile area and held successfully.

16. (SBU) The Catholic Church held its annual Christmas Masses throughout ConGen's consular district and around one million people poured into HCMC to see the Christmas lights and attend Midnight Mass at Notre Dame Cathedral on Christmas eve. In addition to the local observances, the international choir of HCMC held its first Christmas performance in a church since 1974. This ground-breaking event started with a predominantly foreign audience but more and more Vietnamese filtered into the church as the performance went on. One church official speculated that perhaps the Vietnamese had initially stayed away to see if the police would allow the religious carols to proceed and then joined the audience once they were sure the coast was clear.

17. (SBU) Dissident Catholic priests Chan Tin and Nguyen Huu Giai, ardent democracy activists and friends of imprisoned Catholic priest Father Ly, said they were able to participate freely in Christmas services this year. Highlighting the long-standing issue of GVN-confiscated properties, Cardinal Pham Minh Man sent a message to all parishes asking followers to pray for the return of a HCMC church property. Father Chan Tin preached to a crowd of 3,000--including HCMC People's Committee Vice Chairman Nguyen Thanh Tai--and called on the government to keep its promise to compensate for Church land cut in half by a development project. In Hue, Father Giai held Mass at his church

while fellow dissident priest Phan Van Loi held Mass at home.
(Note: Father Giai and Father Loi also met with the USCIRF delegation in October 2007 at Father Loi's home. In April 2007, former Deputy Consul General Ken Chern was stopped from visiting both priests by local police. End note.)

Problems in Binh Phuoc

18. (SBU) Leaders of some Protestant groups reported harassment in some provinces, the worst being in the border province of Binh Phuoc. Local authorities attempted to intimidate followers from attending Christmas celebrations held by the Inter-Evangelistic Movement (IEM) and the United Gospel Outreach Church (UGOC), two groups that do not yet have national-level registration. HCMC-based UGOC leader Pastor Daniel Pham Dinh Nhan said local authorities prevented "outsiders" from joining the celebrations at his congregation of about 600 followers in Thanh An commune, Binh Long district, Binh Phuoc. Pastor Daniel's call to the Ministry of Public Security and provincial religious officials helped secure permission for him to attend the Christmas service, but it did not stop the authorities from cutting the electricity supply to the meeting point during the event. After turning the power back on, followers had to guard an electrical post in the neighborhood to make sure there were no more blackouts. In Chon Thanh district, authorities refused to give approval for one Methodist group to hold Christmas festivities at all. In Dong Phu district, local authorities stopped a Presbyterian group's services and told the head pastor not to hold gatherings. A HCMC-based Presbyterian preacher was also given a warning after preaching in Binh Phuoc during the holidays.

Persistence Pays Off in the End

19. (SBU) In some cases, intervention from higher authorities responding to protests from religious leaders brought about positive results. Despite intimidation by local authorities in Binh Phuoc, IEM leaders repeatedly pressed for their right to celebrate Christmas until "government officials finally gave in." In fact, IEM Pastor Le Minh Duc said authorities ended up sending a provincial TV crew to cover their rally of about 700 followers. Methodist leader Pastor Lam Huu Duc said local officials in the Tien Phuoc district of Quang Nam province initially denied permission for a meeting point of fifty followers to hold Christmas services, but when Pastor Duc called the District Committee for Religious Affairs Chief, he personally authorized and attended the celebration.

Comment

10. (SBU) Unprecedented public rallies of Protestant groups in HCMC and widespread Christmas celebrations throughout the South

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were undeniable evidence of the progress being made on religious freedom in Vietnam today. Post credits the ease with which Christmas services were held this year with the expanding dialogue between religious groups and the GVN. While some problems were reported, the fact that pastors felt confident and comfortable enough to raise their cases with higher authorities meant many issues were resolved on the spot.

12. (SBU) While Christmas services have become fairly routine for many of the larger and more established groups such as the Catholics and the SECV, the chance of problems occurring goes up for smaller and unregistered religious groups. Many Protestant groups who reported harassment by local authorities are currently trying to establish footholds in areas where Christianity is still a relatively new concept and not well-understood or received by the locals. Officials' attempts to ban "outsiders" from attending celebrations also reflect a tendency by at least some in the GVN to keep Protestantism from spreading outside existing, well-established congregations.

13. (SBU) This year's "problem province" of Binh Phuoc highlights another important factor related to the issue of

religious freedom. By all measurements, Binh Phuoc is an underperformer. Foreign investment is scarce, most likely because officials there have been criticized for corruption and confiscation of properties from ethnic minorities and the majority Kinh population alike. As a result, Binh Phuoc's provincial economic competitiveness ranking was the lowest among the Southern Focal Economic Zone provinces in 2006 and 2007. In our discussions with pastors around the consular district, it is overwhelmingly the case that religious freedom problems are more prevalent in areas where corruption, poverty, and poor provincial leadership persist.

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